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A Qualitative Study of Online Disinhibition and Parasocial Bonds Among Indian Adolescents

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) and Parasocial Attachment (PSA) on Indian adolescents' emotional expression, behavior, and identity formation in digital environments. Through a combination of reflective journals and semi-structured interviews with 42 adolescents, the research examines how ODE influences self-expression, emotional release, and the development of parasocial bonds with media figures. Findings reveal that ODE significantly enhances emotional freedom and self-expression online, leading to the formation of parasocial relationships, which act as emotional substitutes for real-life interactions. These relationships were found to play a critical role in adolescents' identity exploration and emotional regulation, particularly in the context of Indian cultural values such as collectivism and family dynamics. The study also identifies the emotional validation through social media engagement as a key mediator in the development of PSA. The results highlight the complex interplay between online disinhibition, parasocial connections, and adolescent development, providing new insights into the role of digital platforms in shaping adolescent identities in non-Western contexts. The study contributes to the literature on digital behavior, identity formation, and cultural influences on online interactions, offering practical implications for media literacy and digital emotional intelligence in educational settings. Future research should expand the sample to include diverse socio-economic backgrounds and employ longitudinal methods to explore the long-term effects of ODE and PSA.

Keywords: Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE), Parasocial Attachment (PSA), Adolescents, Emotional Expression, Identity Formation.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital platforms in recent years has fundamentally transformed human communication, social interactions, and identity formation. Adolescents, in particular, are increasingly exposed to these digital environments, where online interactions serve as pivotal spaces for self-expression and relationship-building. This transformation is not without its consequences, as the dynamics of online behavior significantly differ from face-to-face interactions, leading to the emergence of phenomena like Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE), where individuals feel less restrained in their behavior in virtual spaces [1], [2]. Research indicates that the deindividuation and anonymity afforded by online platforms encourage a more uninhibited expression of thoughts and emotions, a dynamic that holds critical implications for adolescent development [3], [4].

Moreover, the proliferation of social media has also given rise to parasocial relationships (PSR), which refer to one-sided emotional connections individuals form with media figures or personalities, often perceived as intimate despite lacking mutual interaction [5]. While these relationships are not new, the advent of social media has intensified their prevalence, particularly among adolescents who, in the absence of face-to-face communication, may rely on these digital figures for social and emotional fulfillment [6]. In contrast to the well-documented phenomena of ODE, PSR has been less explored in terms of how online disinhibition might influence adolescents' attachment to digital personalities. This gap is especially pronounced in the context of Indian adolescents, who navigate a unique socio-cultural landscape that shapes their engagement with media [7], [8].

In the Indian context, there is a growing body of research on adolescent behavior, media consumption, and digital interaction, yet the intersection of ODE and PSR remains largely unexplored [9]. With increasing access to mobile technologies, Indian adolescents are more exposed to the challenges and opportunities of digital communication [10], [11]. However, the cultural and societal norms in India, which often emphasize collectivism and social hierarchy, could profoundly influence how adolescents interact online, potentially altering the manifestations of ODE and PSR [12]. These localized factors create a need for further investigation into how global theories of disinhibition and parasocial attachment hold in a non-Western, rapidly digitizing society [13].

This study draws on several key theories to guide the exploration of the relationship between ODE and PSR in the context of Indian adolescents. The Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) is rooted in social psychology and posits that online anonymity and reduced accountability contribute to increased freedom in behavior, leading to both positive and negative outcomes [1], [14], [15]. This theory is expanded by Deindividuation Theory, which argues that individuals in online environments may feel a diminished sense of self-awareness, thereby engaging in behaviors they would typically avoid in face-to-face settings [16], [17], [18]. Both theories suggest that online platforms may serve as arenas for adolescents to express emotions and form bonds without the traditional social boundaries present in real-world interactions.

In parallel, Parasocial Interaction (PSI) theory by Horton & Wohl [5], offers insight into how media figures, celebrities, and influencers can foster emotional connections with their audiences despite the absence of mutual interaction. The extension of PSI into the domain of Parasocial Attachment (PSA), as conceptualized by Cohen [19], suggests that these one-sided relationships can evolve into deeper emotional bonds, with implications for adolescents' identity development and social behaviors. PSA, while initially described as benign, may become complex in the context of ODE, as disinhibited online behaviors may facilitate more profound and potentially maladaptive attachments.

Recent research has explored ODE and PSR separately, but few studies have integrated these concepts to examine how online disinhibition might influence the intensity and nature of parasocial relationships among adolescents. ODE has been studied in Western contexts, showing that online environments reduce social anxiety and encourage self-disclosure, which can have both empowering and disempowering effects [3], [4], [20], [21]. For instance, studies have shown that adolescents often disclose more personal

information online, which can lead to both positive social connections and increased vulnerability to exploitation.

The link between ODE and PSR remains underexplored, with a few studies suggesting that increased online disinhibition may intensify the emotional attachment adolescents feel toward media personalities [19], [21], [22]. This is particularly relevant for Indian adolescents, whose social norms and media consumption patterns may shape these digital interactions in unique ways. For example, a study by Prakash et al. [23] and Chatterjee et al. [24] found that adolescents in India, despite being highly digitally connected, often struggle to separate virtual relationships from their real-life social networks due to the strong influence of familial and community expectations.

In a similar vein, research on PSR has highlighted how adolescents' attachment to digital media figures, such as YouTubers or social media influencers, can serve as substitutes for social relationships in offline contexts [25]. However, the consequences of such attachments are mixed; while some studies have pointed to the positive effects of PSR in offering emotional support [19], others have raised concerns about the negative impacts, including loneliness and social withdrawal [26], [27]. Notably, the interplay between ODE and PSR remains underrepresented, particularly in non-Western contexts like India, where adolescents' engagement with media might be influenced by distinct socio-cultural dynamics.

While extensive literature exists on ODE and PSR separately, there is a critical gap in understanding the intersection of these two phenomena, particularly among adolescents in non-Western societies like India. Previous studies have primarily focused on either the behavioral aspects of ODE or the emotional attachment aspects of PSR, without considering how disinhibited online behavior might facilitate the development of parasocial attachments. Furthermore, the existing studies have largely ignored the cultural variations in digital behavior, particularly in societies like India, where social norms, family expectations, and digital literacy levels may all contribute to a unique online experience. This research seeks to bridge this gap by examining the dual influence of ODE and PSR among Indian adolescents, offering insights into how these phenomena manifest and interact in a rapidly digitizing society.

This study contributes to the field by offering a novel integration of ODE and PSR theories in the context of Indian adolescents. It challenges the Western-centric views of digital behavior and social media interactions by focusing on a non-Western context where the intersection of disinhibition and parasocial attachment has not been fully explored. By employing a qualitative approach, this study allows for a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of Indian adolescents, shedding light on how digital disinhibition influences the formation of emotional bonds with media figures and its subsequent impact on their social behaviors and identities. Furthermore, the study introduces a cultural lens into the ODE-PSR relationship, providing new perspectives on how global digital phenomena manifest in localized social contexts.

This study aims to:

1. Explore how the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) influences emotional expression and behavior in Indian adolescents on digital platforms.
2. Investigate how disinhibited online behaviors contribute to the formation of parasocial relationships (PSR) with media figures.
3. Identify the factors that mediate the relationship between ODE and PSR, focusing on the emotional, social, and cultural contexts of Indian adolescents.
4. Provide insights into the implications of ODE and PSR for adolescent identity formation and socialization in the digital age.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes that social reality is constructed from the meanings individuals assign to their personal experiences, beliefs, and the surrounding socio-cultural context [28], [29], [30]. This approach is well-suited for exploring the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) and Parasocial Attachment (PSA) as these phenomena are related to individuals' emotional experiences in digitally mediated social spaces. To gain a deeper understanding of participants' subjective experiences, we employed a phenomenological-hybrid thematic methodology [31], [32], [33]. This hybrid approach combines phenomenological analysis, which focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences, with thematic analysis, which identifies patterns within those experiences.

In practice, the initial data was collected through direct experiences documented in reflective journals, which were then analyzed phenomenologically to extract meaning from the participants' personal experiences. Subsequently, the findings from these journals were analyzed further through thematic analysis to identify patterns or themes that emerged related to ODE and PSA. Both approaches complement each other; phenomenology provides depth of understanding, while thematic analysis helps uncover broader patterns across the data.

Population and Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 42 senior secondary students aged 16 to 18 years, residing in the Chandigarh region of India. Participants were purposively selected based on the following criteria:

1. Active social media use for the past 12 months.
2. Previous experience in self-expression online through social media.
3. Active engagement in parasocial interactions with media celebrities or influencers.
4. Willingness to share personal experiences in a confidential and private research setting.

Justification for the Sample: The sample was drawn from diverse backgrounds (socio-economic, gender, and academic streams) to ensure diversity of perspectives. Based on the theory of data saturation, the researchers ensured that the data collected was sufficiently representative of the relevant variations in experiences. Saturation was reached when no new significant data emerged from subsequent interviews [34].

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected in two phases. In the first phase, participants were asked to write reflective journals for a duration of 7 days to document their experiences related to two main aspects: Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) and Parasocial Attachment (PSA). For ODE, participants were asked to describe experiences related to more liberated self-expression online. For PSA, they were asked to document their experiences of forming one-sided emotional bonds with social media influencers or celebrities.

Each participant was required to document at least two occurrences that illustrated ODE and PSA in their experience. The journal instructions were provided in the form of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to describe the situational context, obstacles encountered, and their emotional reactions to the online interactions. Example journal prompts included:

- *Describe an experience when you felt freer to express your feelings or opinions on social media compared to face-to-face interactions.*

- *Have you ever felt emotionally close or connected to an influencer/media figure? Explain your experience.*

The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 participants out of the original 42. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was conducted in person at private schools that had broad access to social media platforms. The goal of the interviews was to gain deeper insight into the emotional significance associated with online disinhibition behavior and parasocial attachment. Interview instructions included questions such as:

- *How do you feel when speaking to a friend in person compared to speaking on social media?*
- *Is there any figure on social media who significantly influences your life? What makes you feel connected to them?*
- *How do comments or likes on social media affect your emotions?*

The framework for journals and interviews was developed through a review of literature on ODE and PSA and was subsequently adapted to the Indian context. The content validity of the instruments was tested through a review by three experts in psychology, education, and media studies. Following the review, the instruments were revised based on the feedback provided to ensure cultural appropriateness and clarity of instructions.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke [31]. Six stages of analysis were conducted:

1. Familiarization with the data, including multiple readings of the journals and interview transcripts to gain an overall understanding.
2. Initial Coding: Codes were generated inductively, marking relevant segments of data related to ODE and PSA.
3. Theme Development: Major themes related to ODE and PSA were developed by grouping similar codes together.
4. Reviewing Themes: The resulting themes were revisited to ensure consistency and relevance to the original data.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: The themes were named and defined to reflect the meaning embedded in the data.
6. Finalization and Interpretation: The study employed a phenomenological lens to preserve the authentic meaning of participants' experiences, while also offering an in-depth interpretation of the emerging themes.

Methodological Triangulation: To enhance rigor, methodological triangulation was applied. Member checking was conducted by asking some participants to review the initial themes developed from their journals and interviews. Peer debriefing was carried out with an independent researcher to discuss the consistency of coding, while an audit trail was maintained, documenting coding notes and analytic memos to ensure transparency.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Parental consent was obtained for all participants under the age of 18, and participant assent was also obtained to ensure that they understood the purpose of the research and their rights. All participants were provided with clear information regarding the study and the data collection process. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities, and data was securely stored in encrypted form with restricted access.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of reflective journals and semi-structured interviews resulted in the identification of four primary themes and several subthemes related to the research objectives. These themes illustrate the interrelationship between Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) and Parasocial Attachment (PSA) among Indian adolescents, highlighting emotional expression, behavior, socialization, and identity formation in digital spaces. The results are discussed systematically according to the four research objectives.

Influence of ODE on Emotional Expression and Behavior in Indian Adolescents

The Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) was found to significantly influence emotional expression and behavior on digital platforms. Adolescents reported that digital spaces allowed them to express their emotions more freely compared to face-to-face interactions. The anonymity and lack of immediate judgment in online environments facilitated a greater sense of freedom and reduced social anxiety.

Theme 1: Digital Spaces as Confidence Catalysts

- Subtheme 1.1 Freedom from Social Judgment:
Participants expressed that digital platforms provided a safer environment for self-expression, as there was a sense of freedom from immediate judgment compared to offline spaces. The ability to control the presentation of themselves (e.g., through edited posts or selective interaction) helped adolescents feel more confident in expressing their opinions and emotions.
"In school, I hesitate to speak because people will react immediately. Online, I can take my time and say what I really feel." (P8, Male, 17)
- Subtheme 1.2 Experimentation with Identity:
Many adolescents shared that online spaces provided them with the opportunity to experiment with different identities and self-representations. The digital realm was viewed as a place where they could be more assertive, confident, or even sarcastic, in contrast to their offline selves. This experimentation allowed for identity exploration without the risk of immediate rejection from peers.
"On Instagram, I am more outspoken and even sarcastic. In real life, I'm the quiet one in the corner." (P11, Female, 18)

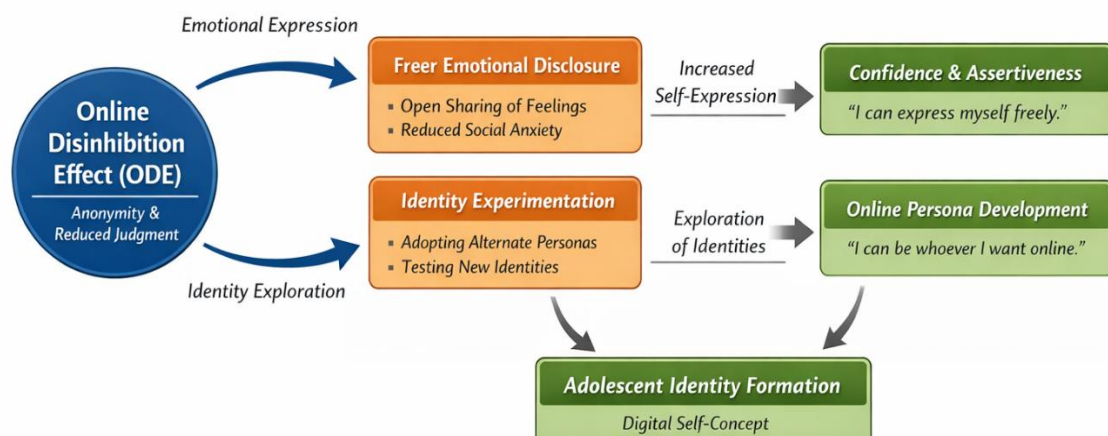


Figure 1. The Role of ODE in Emotional Expression and Identity Formation

Contribution of Disinhibited Online Behaviors to the Formation of Parasocial Relationships (PSR)

The second research objective was to investigate how disinhibited online behaviors contribute to the formation of parasocial relationships with media figures. The findings reveal that ODE plays a significant role in fostering emotional bonds with influencers and celebrities, often replacing real-life social relationships.

Theme 2: Parasocial Bonds as Surrogate Relationships

- Subtheme 2.1 Emotional Companionship:

Adolescents reported relying on influencers for emotional support, especially when they felt lonely or stressed. These parasocial relationships were seen as a substitute for genuine companionship, where adolescents viewed influencers as figures who could understand and provide guidance, despite the lack of mutual interaction.

"When I'm upset, I listen to my favourite YouTuber talk about her day... it's like she understands me even if she doesn't know me." (P24, Female, 17)

- Subtheme 2.2 Aspirational Identification:

Many participants identified with influencers who represented traits, lifestyles, or success in areas they admired. The aspirational attachment to these figures led adolescents to adopt aspects of the influencers' behavior, style, and mindset to enhance their own identities.

"He talks about working hard and staying disciplined. I try to follow that in my studies." (P14, Male, 18)

Factors Mediating the Relationship Between ODE and PSR: Emotional, Social, and Cultural Contexts

The third objective was to identify the mediating factors between ODE and PSR, particularly focusing on emotional, social, and cultural contexts. The study found that emotional validation and social reinforcement were critical mediators in this relationship. The role of Indian cultural values also influenced the way adolescents navigated their online behavior and parasocial interactions.

Theme 3: Digital Validation and Emotional Regulation

- Subtheme 3.1 – Likes and Comments as Emotional Currency:

Adolescents saw likes, comments, and shares on social media as an emotional currency that validated their self-worth. Positive feedback from online interactions, especially from influencers, was viewed as a form of externalized affection and approval, reinforcing their emotional satisfaction and self-esteem.

"If my post gets more than 100 likes, I feel like I'm doing something right." (P1, Female, 16)

- Subtheme 3.2 Managing Mood through Online Interaction:

Many adolescents reported using social media as a mood-regulation tool. When feeling stressed, sad, or anxious, they would turn to motivational videos, memes, or influencer content to alleviate their emotions and feel supported.

"Whenever I fight with my friends, I watch funny reels to calm down." (P26, Female, 16)

Implications of ODE and PSR for Adolescent Identity Formation and Socialization in the Digital Age

The final objective explored the implications of ODE and PSR on adolescent identity formation and socialization. The findings highlight that these digital behaviors are shaping how adolescents perceive themselves and their social roles in both the digital and real worlds.

Theme 4: Risks and Regrets in the Digital Domain

- **Subtheme 4.1 Oversharing and Emotional Aftermath:**
Although digital spaces provided freedom of expression, some adolescents reported regrets after oversharing personal experiences or emotions, particularly in emotionally charged moments. This led to feelings of embarrassment or discomfort when their disclosures were revisited later.
"I posted about my breakup on my status... then I had to explain it to everyone the next day in school. I wish I had kept it to myself." (P18, Female, 17)
- **Subtheme 4.2 Blurred Digital–Physical Boundaries:**
Several adolescents expressed difficulty separating their online identities from their offline selves, leading to a confusion of self-coherence. The boundaries between their digital persona and real-life identity were often unclear, creating challenges in self-perception.
"Sometimes I feel like I'm living two lives — one is my real life, the other is my Instagram life." (P12, Female, 17)
- **Subtheme 4.3 Emotional Dependence on Influencers:**
A smaller group of participants reported becoming emotionally dependent on influencers, where their emotional state was influenced by the presence or absence of the influencer's content or engagement.
"When she doesn't post for days, I keep checking and it feels like I'm missing something important." (P37, Female, 18)

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Key Insights
Digital Spaces as Confidence Catalysts	Freedom from Social Judgment	ODE facilitates self-expression and identity experimentation in digital spaces.
	Experimentation with Identity	Adolescents explore alternative identities, acting more confidently online.
Parasocial Bonds as Surrogate Relationships	Emotional Companionship	PSA serves as a substitute for real companionship, offering emotional support.
	Aspirational Identification	Adolescents model their behavior after influencers, enhancing their identity.
Digital Validation and Emotional Regulation	Likes and Comments as Emotional Currency	Social approval through likes/comments boosts self-esteem and emotional satisfaction.
	Managing Mood through Online Interaction	Adolescents use social media as a tool to regulate emotions and cope with stress.
Risks and Regrets in the Digital Domain	Oversharing and Emotional Aftermath	Oversharing can lead to regret and emotional discomfort.
	Blurred Digital–Physical Boundaries	Difficulty in separating online identity from offline self, leading to confusion.
	Emotional Dependence on Influencers	Emotional attachment to influencers can cause dependency on their content.

The results demonstrate that ODE and PSA significantly shape adolescent self-expression and identity formation in the digital age. These findings contribute to existing literature by challenging conventional theories of social interaction and identity development, highlighting the unique role of digital platforms in adolescent development. This study also suggests that cultural contexts, such as Indian family dynamics and collectivist values, may influence how ODE and PSA

interact in non-Western settings. These insights extend current theoretical frameworks and offer new avenues for exploring digital identity and emotional regulation in future studies.

Discussion

The results of this study highlighted the profound influence of the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) and Parasocial Attachment (PSA) on Indian adolescents. Key findings reveal that ODE facilitated more uninhibited self-expression online, enabling adolescents to engage in behaviors and emotions that might be suppressed in offline interactions. This increased openness in digital spaces also facilitated the development of parasocial relationships (PSR) with media influencers and celebrities. These one-sided emotional connections acted as surrogate emotional support for adolescents, compensating for unmet needs in their real-life social interactions. The analysis further identified that emotional validation through likes, comments, and followers plays a significant role in reinforcing these attachments and self-worth. Moreover, the boundary between online personas and offline selves was often blurred, leading to confusion in self-perception and emotional dependence on online figures.

Several studies have documented similar findings regarding the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) and Parasocial Attachment (PSA) in adolescents. Shankar & Abraham [3] and Ghosh & Banerjee [7] observed that online environments encourage self-expression and emotional release, similar to our study's findings. These studies, conducted primarily in Western contexts, highlighted how ODE contributes to positive emotional release and identity experimentation in adolescents. However, this study adds new depth by considering the role of Indian cultural values in shaping these behaviors. Chakrabarti et al. [25] noted that Indian adolescents, unlike their Western counterparts, experience a stronger sense of social restraint in offline settings, which explains their greater reliance on digital platforms for emotional expression and identity development. The study also echoes the findings of Mackenzie et al. [35] and St Matthews et al. [36], who observed that online disinhibition can lead to emotional vulnerability, a theme that emerged in our findings as adolescents reported emotional discomfort after oversharing on digital platforms.

This study further builds upon global research by emphasizing the intersectionality of ODE and PSA with cultural, emotional, and social contexts. For example, Cho et al. [37] and Park et al. [38] both found that online environments facilitate emotional catharsis, but adolescents in non-Western contexts, such as China and South Korea, experience these effects with different psychological outcomes. These studies highlight the context-dependent nature of online disinhibition and how cultural norms around emotional expression can influence the depth and nature of parasocial bonds. Similarly, that ODE in East Asian adolescents led to increased self-disclosure and attachment to online figures, but the emotional aftermath of such relationships was often more stressful compared to Western adolescents, a pattern also observed in our study [39], [40], [41]. Eyal et al. [42] and Farivar et al. [43] explored the social media disinhibition in the United States and suggested that it often leads to self-identity reinforcement through parasocial connections, further supporting our findings that ODE enhances emotional attachment.

In comparison to these global studies, our research introduces a critical cultural dimension by focusing on Indian adolescents. This has been explored in previous work by Singh et al. [15], who noted that Indian adolescents face unique challenges in emotion regulation due to traditional values of family-oriented collectivism. In this environment, adolescents are more likely to seek parasocial relationships online as a form of emotional compensation for the lack of open emotional support within family or peer groups. The findings of Balick et al. [44] and Kim et al. [45] further reinforce

this idea, showing that in cultures where emotional restraint is a norm, social media provides an outlet for unfiltered self-expression. As seen in our study, this dynamic results in both emotional empowerment and emotional dependency, suggesting that ODE does not solely provide relief but also introduces new emotional challenges for adolescents.

Other studies of adolescents have also examined digital behavior and media consumption. Bottaro et al. [46] and Nejadghanbar et al. [47] examined how Indian adolescents utilize social media platforms for emotional expression and found that they often experience emotional satisfaction from online interactions. This is in line with our findings, where ODE facilitated emotional freedom and identity exploration in digital spaces. However, unlike some Western studies, Indian adolescents also rely heavily on parasocial bonds as a cultural coping mechanism for emotional needs. Research by Ghosh and Banerjee [7] highlighted that Indian adolescents, who often face family and societal pressure, view influencers as emotional support figures, reinforcing our finding that PSA plays a significant role in providing surrogate emotional fulfillment in cultures with less direct emotional expression. The cultural context of Indian collectivism profoundly affects how ODE and PSA manifest, making it a unique case in understanding digital emotional intimacy.

The findings have significant theoretical implications for the existing models of ODE and PSA. Suler's [14] concept of disinhibition has been reinforced, with our study showing that anonymity in online spaces encourages adolescents to engage in emotional self-disclosure, leading to deeper parasocial interactions. The study further enriches Cohen's [19] model of parasocial attachment, suggesting that disinhibited behaviors (ODE) not only facilitate the formation of parasocial bonds but also amplify their emotional depth and significance in adolescents' lives. Our findings challenge the linear model of parasocial relationships, showing that ODE and PSA are not distinct phenomena but reciprocal processes where ODE acts as both a facilitator and consequence of PSA. The cultural variations observed in Indian adolescents provide a new dimension for the theories of ODE and PSA, suggesting that these relationships are not universally experienced but are shaped by societal norms and family structures.

The study offers valuable insights for educational practices. Educators should be aware of the emotional impact of social media on adolescents and consider integrating media literacy programs that emphasize the emotional consequences of online behavior, particularly the formation of parasocial relationships. Schools can adopt digital emotional intelligence education, helping students understand the potential emotional risks of online disinhibition and parasocial attachment. By promoting reflective activities such as journaling, students can be encouraged to assess their own digital behaviors and understand the emotional implications of their online presence. Additionally, schools should create safe spaces for students to express their thoughts about online interactions and learn how to manage emotional dependencies on influencers.

The findings also suggest policy implications regarding social media regulation and adolescent mental health. Given the emotional vulnerability associated with ODE and PSA, policymakers should develop regulations that monitor influencers and ensure accountability for the content they share. Guidelines for healthy social media consumption should be introduced in educational settings to reduce the emotional pressures adolescents face in online spaces. Policies aimed at providing mental health support for adolescents, especially those showing signs of emotional dependency on digital figures, could mitigate the risks of digital disinhibition and parasocial attachment. Furthermore, policymakers should consider regulations that foster responsible digital behavior, addressing issues such as emotional exploitation and cyberbullying.

This study makes a unique contribution to the literature by integrating ODE and PSA theories in the context of Indian adolescents, a demographic that has been largely underrepresented in previous studies. By highlighting the cultural context of Indian collectivism, the study provides a novel perspective on how ODE and PSA intersect to shape adolescents' identities in digital spaces. The research extends Suler's and Cohen's models by demonstrating that ODE and PSA are interdependent processes, where each enhances and reinforces the other. This study challenges Western-centric views of digital behavior, proposing that the socio-cultural environment plays a critical role in shaping adolescents' digital interactions and emotional bonds.

While this study offers valuable insights, it has several limitations. The sample size of 42 participants, drawn primarily from urban Chandigarh, limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions of India or rural populations. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases, particularly in sensitive topics related to online behaviors. Future research should consider using a larger, more diverse sample from different Indian states and exploring the gender and socio-economic differences in the experiences of ODE and PSA. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine the long-term impact of parasocial relationships on adolescent development and identity formation. Research could further explore the role of family dynamics and peer relationships in mediating the effects of ODE and PSA.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) and its role in the formation of Parasocial Attachment (PSA) among Indian adolescents, focusing on how these phenomena influence emotional expression, behavior, and identity development in digital spaces. The findings demonstrate that ODE significantly promotes self-expression and emotional release online, fostering the development of parasocial relationships with media figures. These relationships serve as emotional substitutes for real-life interactions, reinforcing adolescents' identities and emotional well-being in the digital realm. The study also highlights the role of Indian cultural values, showing that adolescents in collectivist societies experience digital emotional engagement in a way that differs from their Western counterparts.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the understanding of ODE and PSA by expanding existing models to include cultural dimensions, particularly in non-Western contexts. The findings refine theories of online emotional engagement and identity development by demonstrating the reciprocal relationship between ODE and PSA. Practically, the research suggests the need for targeted interventions in educational settings to foster digital emotional intelligence and promote healthy online behaviors. Educators and policymakers can use these insights to design programs that support adolescents in managing their digital interactions and emotional experiences. The study's contribution to the field sets the foundation for future research on how digital spaces influence adolescent identity and emotional regulation across different cultural and social contexts.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations, including a relatively small sample size of 42 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader adolescent populations. The focus on adolescents from urban areas, particularly Chandigarh, may not fully represent experiences in rural or socioeconomically diverse settings. The cross-sectional design also restricts the ability to explore the long-term effects of ODE and PSA on emotional development and identity formation. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases in participants' descriptions of their emotional experiences. Future research should expand the sample size and include adolescents from varied geographical and socio-economic backgrounds to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of ODE and PSA, while exploring the influence of different social media platforms, gender, and socio-economic status on these phenomena. Furthermore, integrating experimental or neurobiological methods could provide deeper insights into the psychological processes behind ODE and PSA, offering a more comprehensive understanding of their effects on adolescent development.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

KS was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, data collection and formal analysis, drafting of the original manuscript, review and editing. MG contributed to the refinement of methodology, provided critical inputs during analysis, supervised the overall research process, and contributed to reviewing and editing the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The author used several generative AI tools during the research and writing process. ChatGPT was utilized to help organize and clarify complex concepts, while Grammarly was employed to enhance the grammar, style, and readability of the text, improving the overall clarity of the writing. Although these tools provided valuable support in structuring and refining the manuscript, the researcher independently wrote all the content and conclusions.

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